

## How to Write an Effective Business Letter

The business letter is the backbone of our economy and free enterprise system, because it's the way companies buy, sell, and render services. It's also one of the most important nonverbal images people have of you and of your company. Your telephone voice determines your image when people call; your letters determine your image when you write. The way you communicate on paper is an indication to readers of your education, personality, and professionalism. Your letters also reflect the quality and reliability of your products or services.

So your business correspondence needs to be as professional, friendly, and up to date as your products or services. And, just as the products and services of most companies have changed in the last 10-20 years, so have the rules of written communication. The correct forms of spelling, punctuation, letter styles, sentence structure, word usage, and addressing have all changed. Not using currently accepted correspondence styles and rules is as bad as trying to sell products that have been outdated for a decade. It doesn't convey a quality, up-to-date image of you, and many people react negatively. They think, "If this is a reflection of their products or services, I don't want to deal with them." That can cost your company money (which might cost you in the long run). So here are some easy guidelines to follow:

1. **WRITE AS YOU SPEAK.** The days of pomposity are gone. Overly fancy words are usually considered poor communication, and are often used to cover up the fact that the writers or speakers don't know how to express themselves in good, plain English. Writing simply is hard for some of us because someone (can you remember who?) told us we have to follow a certain style when we write.

For that reason, we think we can't just put fingers to keys and say what we mean. We have to outline what we want to say, then go to the thesaurus to figure out how to say it. Baloney! William Zinsser, author of *On Writing Well*, calls clarity the first test of writing: "If you write clean, elegant sentences with as much simplicity as possible, style will eventually come." Writing the way you speak will help take the pain out of writing for you, and make your correspondence sound more natural and customer-friendly. Now I don't mean to put "you know" and "like, I mean" in your correspondence (or any communication, for that matter). What I mean is to pretend your reader is sitting across the desk from you. Visualize your readers and talk to them on paper as you would talk to them in person. Be friendly. Use contractions and personal pronouns. Use one-syllable words and short sentences. Don't try to be stuffy. a message that has to be studied is not a good communication.

2. **USE A SHORT OPENING SENTENCE.** Let's face it, the hardest part about writing a letter is getting started. We know what we want to say, but we feel like we have to be formal when we start. We don't! There is no need to drag out your first paragraph. Just use a short opening sentence, go to the point, and stick to the point. Readers don't have time to wade through pages of fluff to find out why you're writing. By "fluff," I mean those phrases that don't really add anything, those clauses that are set off by commas, those "nice" words that could really be left out. Most people won't read a 2-page letter, they'll scan it. Most people won't read letters of more than 5 paragraphs, paragraphs of more than 10 sentences, or sentences of more than 20 words. So why spend a lot of time constructing an eloquent, wordy, superfluous opening paragraph if no one is going to read it? Use a short opening sentence acknowledging the reader's letter, phone call, complaint, or praise, and then get to the point.
3. **USE THE ACTIVE VOICE.** An active sentence begins with the person doing something to something (or someone). A passive sentence is backward. It has the object being acted on by the subject. Active construction is always preferable to passive. Let your subject do to your object, rather than having your object done to by your subject. Poor: *The meeting was attended by 10 people.* Better: *Ten people attended the meeting.*
4. **AVOID REDUNDANCY AND "WORDITIS."** Professionalism and readability are also judged by whether writers say what they intend to say, and say it in the best manner. Effective writing is concise. Words are very much like extra pounds — the more you have, the worse the whole package looks. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, and a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reasons that a drawing should have no extra lines, a machine no extra parts, and a body no extra flab. Economizing with words is just a matter of packing the same, or more, meaning into a smaller unit to improve your chances of communicating what you have to say. It isn't always easy. Your idea is so clear to you that you may not realize how difficult or confusing your words may be to someone else.
5. **AVOID PREJUDICIAL LANGUAGE.** Prejudicial language is also a major problem right now. Whether it's much ado about nothing is not the issue; the issue is that, in fact, we in America no longer have repairmen (repairers), firemen (firefighters), policemen (police officers), or even manhole covers (sewer lids). And, while I used to be short and fat, I'm now vertically and horizontally challenged. Write so that you can't possibly offend your readers.
6. **BE ORGANIZED.** Present your points in logical order. Logical organization is basic to clarity. The thoughts in a letter should proceed in logical sequence, one flowing into another from start to finish, in a sequence

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that's easy for the reader's mind to absorb. This principle applies to letters, paragraphs, sentences, even phrases.

How do you achieve such a sequence? By thinking your letter out step by step before you write it — or before you do the second draft. The clarity of a letter is often improved by reversing the sequence of paragraphs. A paragraph may be made clearer by changing the sequence of sentences; a sentence, by changing the order of phrases; a phrase, by varying the order of words. Ideas should fit on top of one another like building blocks, but be sure you get the bottom blocks in first.

7. **BE POSITIVE.** The reader will be more receptive to what you have to say if you say it in a positive voice. Look for sentences from which you can cut the negative. Poor: *The answer does not lie with carelessness or incompetence.* Better: *The answer lies in having enough people to do the job.*
8. **DISTINGUISH OPINIONS FROM FACTS.** Your opinions may be the most intelligent in town, but they're not facts. You owe it to your readers to let them know which is which. Be honest and don't exaggerate. It'll get you farther in the long run.
9. **SUM UP AND SHUT UP.** The last paragraph should tell your readers exactly what you want them to do — or what you're going to do: *"May I have an appointment? I'll call you next Tuesday."*

When you're analyzing a letter that didn't come out exactly the way you wanted it to, ask yourself, "What was I trying to accomplish?" Think it over until you can state the purpose of the letter in one simple sentence.

When you have the purpose clearly in mind, take another look at the letter, and ask yourself a few more questions:

- Did I state my purpose straightforwardly and directly, or did I beat around the bush?
- Did I ramble or put in extraneous material?
- Is the letter geared toward my reader?
- Did I talk normally and conversationally?
- Did I anticipate the reader's questions and answer them as I wrote?
- Did I translate all technical terms the reader might have trouble understanding?
- Do my sentences strike the eye and ear as complete, logical units?
- Are my paragraphs divided into separate thoughts or subjects?

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If you can answer yes to these questions, you probably have an excellent business letter.